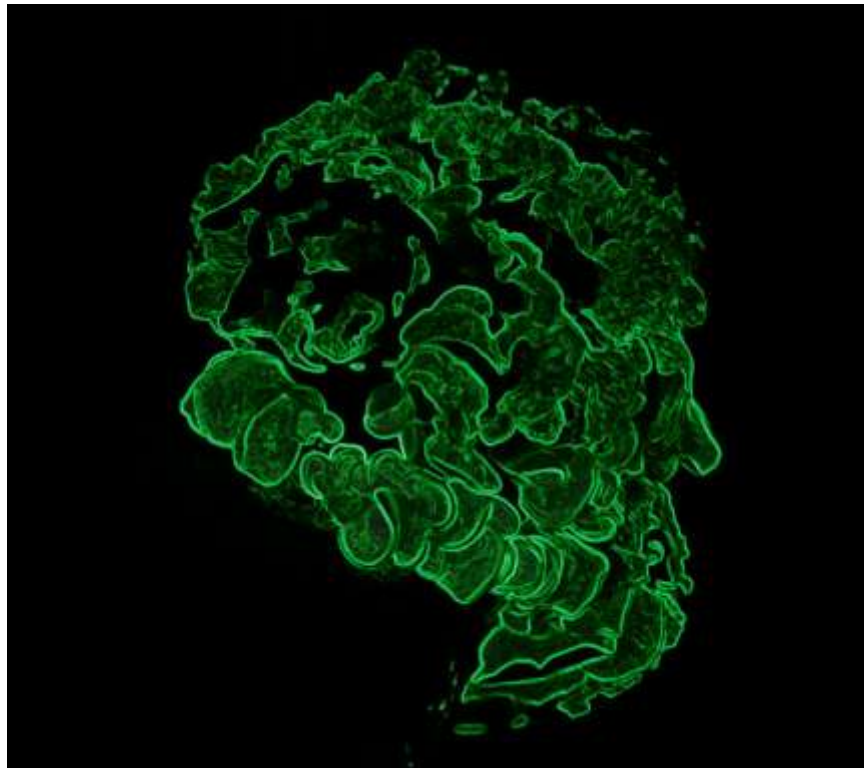


**an extra-pspatial pSecret pSociety tale**



**FOXFIRE** a novelette by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | MAY 2017

## **Foxfire**

by Mike Bozart  
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[[ Convention for the thoughts of characters in this novelette:

*Parkar's [me, Agent 33] thoughts are in this color/shade. /  
Monique's [my wife, Agent 32] thoughts are in this  
color/shade. / Aristotle's thought-quotes are in this color/  
shade.*

In mid-March of 2017, Monique, my forever-fascinating late-30-something Filipina wife (Agent 32), and I (Agent 33), decided to head up to Green Mountain RV Resort in the preliminary eastern range of the Blue Ridge Mountains (NC, USA) for a weekender at the family camper. It was 85 miles (137 km) from our residence in east Charlotte – only about a 100-minute drive if done nonstop; though, such was rare.

It was a sunny, yet quite chilly, Saturday morning in the Queen City as we motored westward on US 74 (Independence Expressway) in our gray, straight-drive with a chattering clutch, 2005 Kia Rio hatchback. Traffic was for the most part on the light side. We were soon passing the uptown towers on the Brookshire Freeway (Interstate 277 / NC 16). The city looked so new, and so quiet. *Almost looks like a to-scale balsa wood model – a life-size set for a Toho movie. When does Godzilla appear to wreak havoc? Which building gets smashed to bits first? / Wonder what my crazy kano [Filipino slang for American] husband is thinking now. No, don't even ask.*

We were making good time; we passed under Interstate 40 on US 321 at 10:24 AM. In 73 minutes we had gone 63 miles (101 km), passing through six traffic lights on the way: three in east Charlotte and three in north Gastonia. *We got up here a little early for lunch. Should have had a second cup of coffee and left the house a half-hour later. Really don't want to eat breakfast. / I'm about ready for some food. My stomach is gurgling. Wonder if he heard it.*

Twenty hillock-bounding minutes later, we were entering the sleepy foothills town of Lenoir. We took Harper Avenue NW

into the downtown area. We parked and started walking on West Avenue NW to pass some time. I spied an ice cream shop across the street.

“Want some ice cream, mahal?” [love in Tagalog] I asked my black-jacketed, black-panted, black-shoed, black-haired Visayan wife.

“Ah, sure, bana. [husband in Cebuano] One scoop will hold me over until we eat lunch.”

And with that reply, we crossed the deserted downtown lane. Corner Creamery was open. The ice cream was pretty good. *Much cheaper than Blowing Rock. / So tasty. Yum-yum.*

At 11:08 AM we were outside Piccolo’s Italian Restaurant. The ever-grinning, short, dark-haired owner greeted us at the door. He was very gregarious and quite friendly. As a bonus to our pizza order, he threw in a free two-liter (67.6 oz.) bottle of cola (though we’re not big soda drinkers). A near-life-size statue of Humphrey Bogart (Rick Blaine from *Casablanca*) kept watch over us as we ate the square slices of Chicago-style pie. (By the way, this place is full of interesting pop-culture artifacts, especially memorabilia related to the Windy City. It’s a must-stop-in if in the area.)

Next, we had a few craft beers at Howard’s Brewing (unfortunately, now defunct) around the corner on Boundary Street NW. The Mistletoe porter was distinctly divine. Strangely, the 30-ish, suds-slinging, tattooed, dirty-blonde-haired waitress mistook me for another red-haired dude that was in there last week. She was so dead-sure that I was that guy that I went along with it; I didn’t correct her. She told me

that I was funny last Saturday. *Hope my doppeldonger [sic] didn't say or do something foul. Doppeldonger, where did that coinage come from? What warped my mind?*

Fast-forward five hours. Monique and I are now on the wooden deck that wraps around two sides of the camper. We're relaxing on the rear (west) side that projects into the dense woods. As the sun begins to set, critters start to move about below, crunching down upon the carpet of dry fallen leaves. *Yikes! We're not alone. What is down there?*

I sipped on my tall goblet of Merlot as Monique nursed her demitasse of pink Zinfandel. It was a nice late winter evening with the temperature in the low 50s (Fahrenheit; 10 to 11° Celsius). *I think that we have enough propane for the night. Sure don't want to go out again. It won't get as cold as last night. / The heat had better not go off in the middle of the night like last time.*

"What kinds of animals are in this forest?" Monique asked, looking very concerned all of a sudden.

"Oh, there are many species, mahal. Way too many to enumerate."

"I mean, what threatening four-legged mammals might be out tonight?"

"Well, I'm sure that there are foxes, coyotes, wolves and bears up here." *Bears?!*

"Oi! Well, when it gets dark, I am going inside. And, I strongly suggest that you do likewise, Agent 33." *Agent 33?*

*Hmmm ... She suspects that I'm recording. / I just know that he'll write up this outing later. He might as well record and get the dialogue correct. His memory is so bad now. He can't remember two days ago.*

“Oh, honey, all of those animals that I just mentioned are afraid of humans.” *Not if they are hungry!*

“Ok, suit yourself, Parkaar. [my ailing alias] But, this pinay [a Philippine woman] is going inside in ten minutes.” *She's spooked.*

“You don't want to savor the sylvan gloaming with me, lovely Agent 32?” *Sylvan gloaming? He's already sauced.*

“No, I'll let you have it all to yourself, dear.”

The softly spreading drapery of darkness settled on the 80% hardwood / 20% conifer forest. It was so tranquil. The campground's year-rounders were already in for the night. *Sure is peaceful up here tonight. / It's so quiet that it's creepy. Feels like a horror movie setting. It's about time to go inside.*

Then I suddenly noticed a greenish glow off in the woods. It was probably about 100 feet (30 meters) away. *Did someone smear the contents of a lightstick on a tree?*

I stood up and pointed. “Monique, do you see that greenish glow down there?”

“Yes!” she screamed. “Well, that's it. I'm going inside now. There's a *mumu* [phantom in Tagalog] down there.” She

then got up from her lawn chair and began walking towards the front door, where she stopped and turned towards me. “How long will you be staying out here, 33?”

“Maybe for a little while, 32. I want to check out that eerie glow. I want to know what it is.” *Oh, boy. I just knew it. Men!*

“Ok, that’s your choice. But, I’m locking the door, bana.”

“That’s fine, my extra-cautious wife. I’ll knock in a three-four-three pattern when I return.” *What?!*

“That’s a losing formation, Parkaar.” *Huh? Oh, a pun on soccer setups. Very clever of her.*

“Ok, it will be four-four-two, Monique.” *That’s better.*

“Stay safe. Bye. Oh, do you have your cell phone?”

“Yes, I’ve got it.”

“Is it charged?”

“Uh, let me check.” I fumbled for my phone in my pants pocket. Once I had it extracted, I checked the battery gauge.

“Ok, it’s at 67%. All good for at least two days, mahal.”

“Ok, see you later, Mr. Nocturnal Explorer.”

“Ok, dear. Just text me if you get scared.”

“I most certainly will. And, you do the same, bana.”

I blew her a kiss. She returned fire and stepped inside.

Next, I heard her successfully lock the door. Then I walked off the deck to the asphalt parking space. I checked our car. It was all locked-up. The just-up-the-street neighbor's camper still had their tiny, white, camper-outlining Christmas lights up; they were on and blithely twinkling away in silence. *They probably got tired of putting them up and taking them down. Well, in another three months, they will have been deemed to have set up their lights early.*

I then walked around to the other side of our Denali-branded camper. A faint deer path curled to the left and descended into the woods. Soon I was walking past the deck posts. Moonlight filtered through the gaps between the deck planks, thirteen feet (four meters) overhead. *Good. We've got some natural illumination tonight. Forgot the working flashlight again. The one in the camper has dead batteries. Bad planning. Par for the curse. [sic]*

I looked off in the distance, moving my head from side to side so that I could relocate that strange green glow. It didn't take that long, as there were hardly any leaves yet on the deciduous trees. *Ah, there it is. Looks to be less than a foot (30.5 cm) in height. Looks like something right out of a sci-fi flick. Or, a horror movie? Hope not.*

Small fallen tree limbs and twigs crackled under foot as I moved towards my target. I heard small animals – probably squirrels and other rodents – scurrying away from me. Then I heard a much larger mammal walking – steadily advancing. *Is that a wolf? Darn! Forgot the damn pepper spray. Let's grab a nice-size rock and a thick stick. Well, just in case.*



I stopped walking and was very still. The unseen animal – whatever it was – kept progressing at the same, slow, measured pace up a small ridge off to my right. It then seemed to be going away from me. And, ten seconds later, this was confirmed, as the sound of the animal's steps diminished and faded away. *Whew! I bet that was a wolf. Or, I guess that it could have been a deer. Maybe a wolf tracking a sick or injured deer. It probably picked up the scent. Canis stalkerazzi. [sic]*

Everything was quiet again. I looked up at the sky. Some thin cirrus clouds formed elongated zones for the emerging stars. *Two stars in zone 4. Five stars in zone 2. One in 3. Three in 1. Clean, lubricate, protect. 3-in-One Oil. 1894. Originally for bicycles. Wonder if it is still produced. [It is, but now by the WD-40 Company.] What a strange universe. Cue The Man from RavCon. What could it all mean? Don't think that I'm smart enough to know. Maybe one only knows in death. If ever.*

I restarted my gradual trek through the moonlit eastern North American forest. The green glow was now only about thirty feet (nine meters) ahead. *What in the world is that? Looks like it's attached to the tree. Need to take a pic of it and show it to Monique.*

Sixteen seconds later, after stepping over a wide-girth, wind-topped oak tree, I was looking at the green luminous glow, which was right at eyelevel. *Ah, I know what this is. It was in one of the pocket field guides.*

The source of the soft green light was actually foxfire – a type of bioluminescent fungi. The layered clamshell-like growth was about nine inches (23 cm) tall by about six inches (15 cm) wide by two inches (5 cm) deep. It kind of looked like the profile of an ancient philosopher from Athens or Rome. I snapped a photo with my LG semi-smartphone. *Well, this old birch tree is most definitely not long for this world. Massive decay is already underway. Wonder why this particular wood-reducing fungus glows in the dark. Maybe it's to warn nighttime foragers. 'Hey, don't even think of eating me! – I taste really bad; in fact, I may even be poisonous to you!' Hmmm ... Wonder how bad it actually tastes. Is it really poisonous? Never saw this listed in the toxic category in any of my mushroom books. Ah, maybe just a little nibble. Oh, why not? You only live once, sport. And, you only die once, too. Well, maybe. Who really knows? Yep, here goes.*

I broke off a small piece and placed it in my mouth. I bit down on it lightly and wrinkled my face, not knowing exactly what to expect, but anticipating a rancid flavor. The texture was fairly firm; the taste was a bit acrid, yet endurable. There was actually a not-totally-disagreeable aftertaste. No, it certainly wasn't a tasty prize-winning morel; however, I didn't have too much trouble getting it down the hatch. *Wonder how long it will take to feel any effects. My stomach is not completely full now. Last ate over six hours ago. Will there be any effects? Probably inert, I would bet. But, if there is something neural coming down the tracks, we're close enough to the camper if internal fireworks start going off. It's not like we're eight miles (13 km) out. Yet. Ha! Well, while we're waiting, we can send the foxfire pic to Monique. We for*

*me. I sure seem to love 1<sup>st</sup> person plural these days. At least I'm not down to 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural. That's probably game-over time. Broughton [Mental Hospital of Morganton, NC] calling. Hello? Anyone there? They are not here.*

This is the text that I included with the photo of the foxfire:

This is what the green glow is, honey. It's called foxfire. It's actually a fungus. I'm fine. Nice little walk. Heading back shortly. How are you doing at base camperoni? [sic]

Monique replied a minute later.

I'm doing fine, my intrepid Agent 33. Just missing you. Get back here soon, Parkaarazzi. [sic] Mahal kita, asawa ['I love you, wife' in Tagalog]

And then I replied.

Are you sure that you don't want to see the mysterious green glow in person, seductive sexarita? [sic]

Her answer came back quickly.

Very sure. See you soon. Stay safe, Fungarazzi! [sic]

I looked at the foxfire again. I let my left index finger touch the cool fungal mass. And then, a thought suddenly blasted into my head, whence I have no idea. *The energy of the mind is the essence of life. / That's Aristotle! The pride of Stagira hit a home run there. No doubt that they cheered him all over Chalcidice. Look at that parade. Standing room only. An errant ball rolls down the dusty promenade. The growing applause. Well, maybe celebrated in the upper echelons only. The bright Mediterranean sun in their faces. A light onshore breeze. What a moment in time. It was their*

*present. It was all going to be Greece forever. Wow! My thinking sure has ticked up a notch after munching on that lustrously verdant elf ear. I'm channeling a famous ancient. And, what a famous ancient to channel. What a past present for this present! Wonder what lies ahead.*

I pulled my finger back. My brain flashed. *Yes, that's a famous quote by Aristotle alright. Or, was it by Plato? Wait. Socrates? Or, was it by Pliny the Elder? Or, the Younger? Or, the history-passed-over bummer? Hmmm ... Not absolutely sure if it was Aristotle now. Doubt creeps into those forgotten crevices. And, how it expands so very quickly. Uh, could I utilize a 50-50 on that one, Regis? Shouldn't have daydreamed so much in that 11<sup>th</sup>-grade World History class. [Independence High School, Charlotte/Mint Hill] Mr. Carpenter would be disappointed. Ah, he knew I wasn't going anywhere noteworthy. Just have them know that it was Greece before it was Rome, and move them along. Wonder if Mr. Carpenter and his Indian wife are still alive? Guess they would be around 70 or so now. Time sure flew out that classroom window. Fast, in retrospect.*

My left index finger again drifted back to the foxfire. It was as if it was being drawn by an invisible, irresistible force. And then, I saw it: It was the right-side profile of Aristotle in the gnarly fungal growth. In that very same moment, another ancient thought was flung into my 21<sup>st</sup> century mind-space. *No great genius has ever existed without some touch of madness.* / *Ok, that settles it; that was definitely Aristotle. And now, the famous Greek is existing in some ever-after as a tree fungus. Well, at least for me at this point in time. Boy,*

*this is so very weird. Uberifically [sic] bizarre. Hope there is more to come.*

As I again felt the edge of the fungus, another quote by Aristotle shot into my mind. *Thinking is the top bliss and joy in life.* / *Yes, indeed. It truly is, old boy. It separates us from other lifeforms. Even intraspecies. You really nailed that one, you sly syllogist. Couldn't have said it better myself. A five-star profundity there. The cog in cognition. How many quotes remain in this session? When does this special effect wear off? Hope it doesn't last until dawn. Don't want to be awake all night.*

My left index finger then brushed the gills on the underside of another foxfire cap. I now realized that I would only receive the profound quotes when I made physical contact with the glowing fungus; a tactile connection was necessary. And then, shazam! *The ideal man bears the accident of life with dignity and grace, making the best of the circumstances.* / *Another goal scored there, Mr. A. Top-self quality. Deft delivery. World-class material all day long – and all night long, too. Oh, so sorry that you are alive to read this. Ha-ha. Such dark hilarity. Never knew that Aristotle was so witty. Did we really think that after Plato it would just be pasty platitudes? 'Only the dead have seen the end of war.' Perhaps Plato's best. Over two millennia out, and it's still as true today as it was on day one. So, when's the next war? Just hang tight; it will be here before you know it, bunky. Will it settle things? Sure, it will. Well, up until the lead-up to the next war. Wonder what Aristotle thought when he heard his mentor say that. / *It is not enough to win a war; it is more important to organize the peace.* / *Wow! Aristotle replies.**

*This is something else. Let's keep this open channel open. And flowing. Further. Dredge ahead at full speed. Deepen all ancillary canals. Yeah, that's looking very nice, Ed. Ok, and what is your feeling about art, Aristotle? / The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance. / So very well-stated, sir! Bravo! Such a prescient remark. Way ahead of your time. Ok, I am sure that you had to deal with critics for your bold statements, as did Socrates and Plato. Ahem ... Well now, Aristotle, what do you have to say about criticism? / There is only one way to avoid criticism: Do nothing, say nothing, and be nothing. / I love it! I'll give you a standing ovation for that. Pure genius. How did I never hear or read any of these gems? Maybe because I had my head buried in nowhere. [sic] Any views on knowledge and wisdom, father of Western thought? / Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom. / Wow! Never heard that maximum maxim. I should get out of this century more often. My apologies. Well, I know that I am just a bloke of average intelligence. Ok, maybe I'm a 7.25 out of 10 on my keenest day. So, knowing that, what should I do? Try to get into some degree-mill online graduate school? Or, search for Socrates' hemlock? / The more you know, the more you know you don't know. / A paradoxical aphorism there. And, couldn't agree more. Carefully build your unique ladder to get out of your dark dungeon. Make sure that all of the rungs are strong and secure. Then carefully climb your ladder to the top of the wall where that little window is – the one that you've been staring at for years; yes, that one which promises a wondrous tomorrow. Then, once on that stone sill, take a look around. Ah! You were actually in a room atop a tower. And, it's a long, long, oh-so-very-long way down.*

*You're stuck. Ok, that's probably not the best example, is it? / Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all. / Need to do both. Ok, we got it. What about hope? / Hope is a waking dream. / Monique will like that one. But, not an Ambien® sleepwalking episode, right? Sorry, you've never heard of it. Let's just move along. Hmmm ... What would my wife like to ask the eternal mind of Aristotle? Any adages regarding friends and enemies? / The antidote for fifty enemies is one friend. / She'll like that one. Yes, she will. You see – or maybe you can't – there's this mega-gossippy pinay group in Charlotte. Well, really all over the globe. We refer to them as Group Z. They're a rather toxic ensemble, saturated in self-loathing. Their prime desire is to pull others into their mire. My wife avoids them at all cost. / A friend to all is a friend to none. / So true. She'll like that one, too. How about one more on friends? Am I being greedy? If so, cancel my request. / A friend is a second self. / Nice. Score! Another one in the back of the net. You haven't missed from the spot yet, old guy. Did you ever wonder what life would be like 2,300 years later? Well, most of the problems of your time are still here, only magnified. / Republics decline into democracies, and democracies degenerate into despotisms. / Not so optimistic, huh? Not a big fan of one person, one vote? Dolts are easily manipulated by crafty politicians. Was that your thinking? Mob rule by those who eschew school? Well, you just may have had a functioning crystal ball back there. Where did you leave it? Under the Parthenon? How did all of those archaeologists not unearth it? You know, you could get a lot for it on Ebay. What's Ebay? Buying and selling on an electronic screen. Stuff moving from A to B. Money moving*

*invisibly. Fees making some very rich. I bet you could figure out the whole scheme in an hour. / Pleasure in the job puts perfection in the work. / I agree with you yet again. Too bad that so many are unhappy with their jobs now, Big A. Can I call you Big A? I'll take that as a yes. / Whoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast or a god. / Well, I spent many years in near-solitude. I'm certainly no god, or demigod. Thus, maybe I was a wild beast for a while. So, you weren't one for the ascetic lifestyle. Were you in the 'an idle mind is the devil's workshop' camp? / We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit. / I actually think that I've heard that one before, A. I believe that it was at a motivational seminar. / It is the mark of an educated mind to entertain a thought without accepting it. / Well, we certainly will consider any thought, even if for only a millisecond. Yes, even the vile hate-filled thoughts make us wonder about possible abuse, slighting and neglect. / Through discipline comes freedom. / Yeah, I agree with you yet again, A. So many today – in America at least – think that they can achieve their goals by irregular, undisciplined half-efforts. Must have a regimen. And, one must stick with it. Follow-through. It seems that so few have patience for that anymore. It's hedonism to the max now, A. Gratification cannot be delayed one nanosecond. Not sure how this ends. Not good, I would wager.*

And then, my cell phone chirped. I had received a text message from my wife.

Are you ok?

I replied immediately.



Yes, all is going quite well, mahal.

What are you doing?

Oh, just getting some good thoughts from the Big A – future story material.

The Big A? What or who is that? Please don't tell me that you are communicating with a fungus-infested tree, Agent 33.

Ha! How did you know, astute Agent 32?

I know your brain better than you do. It's time to wrap it up and come back to the camper before a bear eats you.

It's all good, even if the wood is rotten.

The clock has started, Parkaar. No admittance after five minutes.

Ok, I am heading back now. See you very soon. Oh, please turn the outside light on. Salamat. [thanks in Tagalog]

I touched the foxfire one last time for the night. *Wicked men obey out of fear; good men, out of love. / Yeah, no doubt, Aristotle. No doubt, whatsoever. Well, I've got to go now. Oh, before I go, might you have one more apothegm that you could serve up in an instant? / Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies. / That's good stuff there – a most righteous one to leave on. I'll share that with my wife. She will really like that one. Well, until, if, and/or ever ... again. It's certainly been rather grand. And, most unforgettable. Give my regards to the others, if there are any in this hyper-state. Gia sou. [goodbye in Greek]*

The walk back to the camper was incident-free: No animals – or humans – attacked me. I didn't hear anything, either.

And, the interjected Aristotelian quotations had ceased. My thinking seemed to be back to normal. Or, as close as possible. *Now, when did I first hear Aristotle mentioned in school? I think that it was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade at [Our Lady of the] Assumption. [Catholic School, the former location on Shenandoah Avenue at The Plaza in Charlotte] It was late 1977, or maybe it was early 1978. Hmmm ... 1978. What a year. Evan and I at our first concert: Earth, Wind & Fire at the original Charlotte Coliseum on Independence Boulevard. The All 'N All Tour. Where's that 8-track tape now? Probably in an attic somewhere. That cold Sunday evening. Yeah, it was January 8, 1978. Funny how some dates stick. His dad dropped us off. That big gate-crunch. They didn't open enough doors. Almost crushed to death. Lifted off our feet. That cool black dude saved us by making some space for us to breathe with his elbows and forearms. Where is he now? Is he still alive? I wonder. And, back there at the flat-roofed, one-level parochial school on that spring day in '78, Paul threw that unabridged dictionary through the lower single-pane, tilt-open window. Such an irascible lad. And, he died in the '80s in east Charlotte. Did he die before or after Peter? Can't seem to remember. [Paul died from mishandling a loaded gun. Peter died in the cockpit of a plane in a storm; he was learning to fly.] And, that June day in '78 when I called the Korean girl and asked her out. She politely declined. Where is that green desk phone now? Guess it all gets lost in time. Wonder what Aristotle's wife was like. Yey! She turned the light on.*

After a 4-4-2 rap pattern on the frosted-glass window with my right knuckles, Monique opened the narrow, beige, thin sheet-metal door. *Finally!*

“Where have you been?” Monique asked. “You’ve been gone 53 minutes!” *That long?*

“Oh, I was just down at the green glow – the foxfire.”

“You just stood down there and looked at some glowing fungus on a tree for nearly an hour?” *That’s so buang! [crazy in Cebuano]*

“I didn’t just stare it.”

“Well, what else did you do?”

“I touched it.” *Oh, boy!*

“You touched some slimy fungus? Why on Earth would you do that? You had better go wash your hands.”

“I received quotes from a famous Greek philosopher: the one and only Aristotle.”

“What?! You’ve lost your marbles, bana.”

“I have more than one left?” I chuckled.

Monique wasn’t amused. “You need to lie down and go to sleep.”

“You don’t want me to tell you about it?”

“I’m tired. Just tell me in the morning, hon.”

“Ok.”

We both got in the queen-size master bed. Monique was asleep in just ten minutes. However, I was still excited from the Big A experience. As I lay on my back looking at the rounded ceiling, my mind was in replay mode. *Man, that sure was something else. Need to take Monique down there tomorrow morning. Maybe she will get up before sunrise. Maybe. But, will she eat a piece of the foxfire? Probably not. Though, at least she can see it up close. She'll like taking her own pic of it for her Facebook page. She'll most likely caption it with something like 'My hubby was so fascinated with this glowing tree fungus that he stayed next to it for an hour last night.' Yeah, something droll like that. And, maybe in the comments section I could list the Aristotelian quotes that I 'received'. I need to write them down now before I forget.*

I got up and quietly stepped into the kitchen area. There was some notebook paper and a ball-point pen next to a 500-piece jigsaw puzzle on the booth-style dining table. Surprisingly, my memory was razor-sharp. I recollected all of the Aristotelian quotes and my corresponding thoughts with remarkable ease. *Wish my memory was always this crisp.*

After finishing my modified shorthand notes, I switched on the ten o'clock news (Charlotte). The picture quality was pretty good tonight. (I had installed a long-range, directional, digital TV antenna last autumn.)

I grabbed a German bock beer (purchased at Aldi) from the small fridge. As I sipped it I learned about yet another shooting after a case of road rage on Interstate 85, a stabbing after an argument in southwest Charlotte, and a

small child freezing to death after being left out in the cold overnight in Burke County, while the mom was passed-out on heroin. *It's never going to get better. This species is doomed. Stupid, petty and violent. A terrible trifecta. Eventually terminal, I would bet. One can always hope for an asteroid, I guess. Getting nihilistic again. Need to lighten up.*

After yet another annoying-as-hell Clott Scark car dealership commercial, the weather segment commenced. The morning low was only sinking to 39° (Fahrenheit; 4° Celsius) and tomorrow's high was rising to 57° (Fahrenheit; 14° Celsius) under fair skies. *Looks like a decent day tomorrow. Maybe stop at Lineberger Park [in Gastonia] on the way back. No rush to get back to Charlotte. Nothing to do at the house. The heater seems to be doing ok. It must be 70° [Fahrenheit; 21° Celsius] in here. Even if the propane tank ran out right now, we would be ok. Well, I would; Monique, maybe not. She would have an outbreak of goosebumps if it got below 55°. [Fahrenheit; 13° Celsius] Let's hope it makes it to at least four in the morning. Make it five!*

After zoning out during the car and macro-beer commercials, the sports segment started. A young, white, male reporter was interviewing a burly, mustachioed, dark-haired, intense-looking, Caucasian high school coach after his baseball team had lost the game by a single run after leading by five in the eighth inning. "We cannot learn without pain," he sternly announced to the camera. *That's a quote by Aristotle! What are the odds of hearing that after that foxfire experience? One in million? Maybe not that unlikely. Still, what a coincidence. Wonder if that coach has a list of Aristotle's most famous quotes. Lists. He loved to make lists.*

*Lists of lists. To-do lists. Non-essential lists. Listing ships. And, shipping lists. Get 'em out by Friday!*

The news ended at 10:28. As another string of commercials started, I got up and very quietly opened the door. Once on the deck, I allowed my eyes to adjust to the low light level. Then I walked over to the far corner and peered out into the woods, looking for the magical green glow. But, I didn't see it, not even when I changed positions to get different sight lines. *Hmmm ... Now, where did it go? I know that I am looking in the right direction. I saw it from right here, looking precisely this way – at this very angle – just several hours ago. Does the glow not last all night? Weird. Will have to check on fungal Aristotle tomorrow. Better go back inside before Monique wakes up. She'll be none too pleased if she discovers me out here; she won't be thrilled in the least.*

I looked up at the starry sky and saw what was most likely a meteor. It streamed for about eight inches (20.3 cm) of arc and then vanished into the vast blackness. *So much celestial stuff whizzing about in space. I guess that the night sky looked pretty much the same for Aristotle and the ancients. Though, some shifting of the constellations has certainly occurred. The Big Dipper's bowl was deeper back then, and the end of the ladle's handle wasn't as bent. It's all moving farther and farther away, the astronomers say. Expanding expansion. Existence's enigma moving on and on. Out and out. And out ... on another level ... another universe? Oh, what am I thinking now? Time to go to sleep before I do something more foolish than usual.*

I walked back to the front door of the camper and stopped. A firefly caught my eye. It was hovering over the only-still-working, railing-mounted, solar-powered patio lamp. The lightning bug pulsed in yellow as the lamp pulsed in blue. *Wow! Their frequencies are almost in sync. Or, were. Looks like the firefly has sped up the tempo. Must be a drummer. Ha! Seems to be the only firefly out tonight. An early hatcher. Still a little cool for them. Don't think this one will ever see July. Maybe a hater of hot weather – just like Monique and I.*

I then opened the right-hinged door and lightly stepped into the mini-foyer. After flipping the little, red, plastic toggle to the left to set the lock, I parted the sliding doors a few inches (7.6 cm) and peered into the master bedroom. Monique was still asleep. *Ah, good. I didn't wake her up. / What has he been doing? He just will not settle down tonight. That fungus has hijacked his brain.*

I slithered back into bed and hugged Monique. *I'm going to surprise Mr. Smooth.*

“So, are you now finished for the night?” she suddenly asked. *Oops! She was awake.*

“Yeah, yeah. I'm all done for the night, honey.” *Good.*

“What were you doing out there? You didn't walk back down to that fungus again, did you?”

“Oh, no. I was just on the deck.”

“What were you doing on the deck?”

“I was just counting the stars.”

“Oh, how many did you count?”

“One hundred forty-one, dear.”

“You didn’t really count 141 stars, Parkaarstarsky. [*sic*] You just said that because it’s a palindromic prime number.”  
*Parkaarstarsky? Hope I can remember that one.*

“Yes, it’s palindromic, mahal; but, it’s not a prime number. One plus four plus one equals six. Therefore, 141 is not a prime number, as six is a multiple of three. Remember that old math trick that I told you about. My probability professor at UNCC (University of North Carolina at Charlotte) shared that one with the class. It was back in 1985. I’ll never forget it. I still use it a lot.” *Why did I have to ask?*

“Yes, yes, I remember. Ok, let’s go to sleep now, 33.”

“Oh, just one more thing, honey. When I looked for the foxfire from the deck, it was gone. It was like it had vanished – poof! – into thin air.” *Poof! ... into thin air. Oh, boy ...*

“Oh?”

“Yes. Hey, let’s check it out tomorrow morning. Maybe get up before dawn.”

“Ok, sure. Goodnight.”

“Love is two bodies occupying a single soul.”

“Huh?” *Damn! Botched it.*



Monique was back asleep in just five minutes. It took me a little longer, but eventually consciousness was surrendered.

Sometime in the wee hours, I had a very vivid dream. I was back in ancient Greece. It was the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. And, it was night. None other than Aristotle was showing Alexander the (future) Great an inscription under a growth of foxfire in the forest just beyond the outer stone wall of Stagira. I was watching from above, as if I was an imperceptible ghost. I slowly descended to a height just above their heads. The inscription on the trunk of the thin-bark tree – in Greek of course – was translated for me as Aristotle pointed to it; I faintly heard:

*Courage is the first of human qualities, because it is the quality which guarantees the others.*

And then, Alexander looked up. I thought that maybe he detected my presence. But, he just looked back down again. Maybe it was a passing cormorant.

Then I started drifting out over the Aegean Sea. Moonlight was shimmering on the indigo swells. Suddenly I started falling. Faster. And faster. I woke up just before a most-certain fatal splashdown. *Whew! Why do I keep having dreams that end with me falling from some great height? Failing?*

I checked to see if I had awoken Monique when my arms jerked. I had not; she was snoring away blissfully. The red LED digits on the cheap, black, electric alarm clock stated that the time was now 3:13. *The night of foxfire. Won't be forgetting this one. Foxfire Apartments on Idlewild Road at*

*Electra Lane. [in east Charlotte] And, all those years I thought that foxtire was just a made-up word by some residential development consultant. Or, maybe to him or her it was just a cozy-sounding concocted word to lure tenants. Maybe they were completely ignorant of the existing meaning. Hmmm ... Well, who knows? I think that apartment complex was built 47 years ago. Yeah, 1970. Seems about right. The guy or gal – or committee members – who came up with that name are probably all dead now. Still can't believe that Jim peed on the floodlight that illuminated that curved, brick, shrub-fronted apartment sign back in 1980. No, it was 1981. He's lucky that his wang [slang for penis] didn't get sizzled. What a crazy night. Did this follow or precede the 'electrified fence theory' night in Chantilly? [an older neighborhood in inner east Charlotte that is now glaringly gentrified] He's lucky that he didn't get zapped that night, too. It all seems to blur now. And, Gally was so drunk that night. Lying on broken glass on his living room floor. Who broke the long-neck bottle? How did it break? That old shag carpet. Beer being poured on him. And in the morning, the Paulster was holding up some girl's petite bra. 'Who's micro-bra is this?' Where is that lass now? Such lunacy. Lucky no one got arrested. But, the cops did make an appearance for something. What was it? The noise level? Hmmm ... Can't seem to remember now. Oh jeez, why am I even wasting mind-space and mind-time on such past nonsense? Aristotle wasn't mentioned that night. On second thought, maybe he was by zany Mike A. [died in late December of 2015 in Salisbury, NC] He had made a list of various philosophers and asked us to pick our favorite one. Aristotle was on that list. First, I think. Who did I pick? Can't*

*seem to remember. Well, time to get some much-needed shut-eye.*

The last time that I saw the numerals on the clock next to my wife, it was 3:33. I awoke at 7:31 AM. Monique was still asleep. The air inside the camper was still warm. The propane hadn't run out during the night; we still had heat. *So glad that the tank lasted the whole night. Not even sure if that Walmart in Lenoir is open 24 hours.*

I kissed my sleeping wife on her right cheek, but she didn't stir. *She must have been really tired. Just let princess sleep.*

Then I got up and made some coffee. Being Sunday morning in the South, the over-the-air TV choices were quite limited. It was mostly religious shysters interspersed with miscellaneous homeware infomercials. I soon turned it back off. *Let the HolyTurboVac suck all the satanic particles out of your house! It's only \$49.95 if you order in the next thirty seconds. And, it comes with a 90-day, money-back guarantee that is backed by God himself. The all-powerful motor is warrantied for life – this one and the next one. And, if you act right now, we'll throw in an extra HolyTurboVac for Aunt Ruthie. So, what are you waiting for? Suck Lucifer's particulates right up into the easily cleanable sacrosanct dust sack. Then promptly empty onto your problem neighbor's yard. Why do I think such nonsense? Monotony? Check.*

“Good morning, my kano.”

I turned my head to the left to see Monique's cute bronze face in between the room-dividing doors. “Why, hello there, my dearest pinay. Want some coffee?”

“I want your sausage. [slang for ... well, you probably guessed it, or reference *wang* on a previous page] Get in here now, Wankerazzi [*sic*] and prepare for organasm.” [*sic*] *She sure comes up with some priceless coinages.*

I obliged. Well, there were worse ways to spend a Sunday morning in Appalachia.

Forty-four minutes later we were sitting across from each other at the dining table. The sun was up now. Monique was devouring some microwaved chicken fried rice.

“Want to try to find the foxfire in a little while, hon?” I asked, as I was anxious to further investigate the tree fungus.

“Sure, just give me two minutes. So, you were going to tell me about your foxfire experience.”

“Oh, yes. Well, I must have been channeling Aristotle, mahal, because I kept receiving quotes by him. They just kept coming into my mind as I touched the glowing fungus.” *Utter madness. I bet he surreptitiously took something psychoactive.*

“By chance, did you secretly ingest any of your magic crystals last night?” *Wish I still had some of those granules de grandeur.*

“Nope. I don’t have any, honey.”

“Tell me the truth, 33.”

“It’s the stark and patently honest truth: I iz [*sic*] totally out of stock, 32.”

“Ok, just checking. You have to admit now: Your story is quite bizarre, my Parkaarismo.” [sic]

“Well, let’s go down there and see if you can tap into some Aristotelian quotes, too.”

“Ok, let me get my jacket, Sergeant Psychonautica.” [sic]

I chuckled.

As we exited the deck, I noticed that the temperature on the exterior thermometer was 43° (Fahrenheit; 6° Celsius). *Good hiking weather. Should we hike to the summit? That may be too much for her.*

In three minutes we were down in the foxfire area, searching for that half-dead birch. Twenty-two seconds later, I spotted the tree. However, a large animal’s claw scratch was right where the foxfire had been.

“Honey, it was right here. I swear it was.”

“Right there? Are you completely sure that this is the right tree, 33?” *I’m so sure that he’s recording this.*

“I’m positive, 32. This is the very birch tree. It was right there where the scratch marks are. It looks like a bear ripped it clean off the trunk. Maybe there’s a black bear walking around with a headful of Aristotle’s most famous quotes.”

“Now, what good would that do a bear, Parkaar?”

“Not sure, Monique. Might lead to madness. If we see a bear trying to remove its head, we’ll know that we have our culprit.” *A bear trying to remove its head. What in the world?!*

“I don’t want to see a bear, period. Let’s go back to the camper before we do.”

“Ok. But, you do believe me, right?”

“I believe that you believe it.” *She doubts it.*

We marched back towards the camper in silence. A plastic convenience store cup had washed down the slope. I picked it up. *Gosh, I hate litterbugs, just as much as Agent 2 does.*

“Is that cup recyclable, 33?” Monique asked.

“Yes, I see the triangle of arrows on the bottom, 32.”

“I guess that everything gets recycled eventually, one way or another, even our atoms.”

“I agree, Monique. Constant ongoing recycling.”

“Where do you think this world is going, bana?”

“I think that it’s still on its set-long-ago course: more wars – probably even a nuclear one soon; more mindless violence; more explosive religious fanaticism; more pettiness; more envy leading to stupid squabbles, fights and general nastiness; more disgusting bullying; more exploitation; more addiction; more depression; more suicides; more pernicious scheming. Ok, I’ll stop there. I don’t want to get overly optimistic.” I chuckled.

“Snarkity snark. [sic] Ha-ha. Very funny, 33. Why now, aren't you the über-pessimist now? Meet Mr. Killjoy, the death of the party.”

“I truly hope I'm wrong, 32, but I'm beginning to think that there is something innately wrong with us as a species. Maybe if we weren't primates ...” *Huh?*

“What kind of ridiculous statement is that, Parkaar? Are you saying that we'd be better off as bacteria?”

“Maybe. Or, maybe as plants.”

“No thanks. I don't want an animal munching on me, and not having any way to stop it.”

“Or, maybe neither.”

“What?!”

We were now walking around on the deck. I started to sweep the fallen leaves off as our conversation continued.

“Our brain size is nice and all, and has certainly led to some great technological advances. However, some of our bad primatal behavioral traits and tendencies are proving hard to shake off – hard-to-sever vestiges. Chimpanzees are insanely jealous, viciously violent creatures.”

“What about bonobos? They are in our lineage, too, 33. There's progress. And, how in the world do you know exactly what early humans were thinking?”

“Well, you can approximate by what they did; what and how they destroyed; who and how they killed.”

Just then we heard a large mammal in the woods below the deck. I walked over to the far railing. Some seventy feet (21 meters) downslope, there was an adult black bear walking back and forth between a sycamore and maple tree. It was as if its brain had been damaged, intoxicated, or possibly diseased. *I bet that's the bear that ate the foxtail last night. It's slowly going nuts because it ate way too much – heck, it ate the whole damn thing! Its brain is confused. Its neural circuits are crossed-up. It can't make sense of the input. But, why is it walking in such a precise pattern between those trees? Perhaps the voice of Aristotle is saying: Patience is bitter, but its fruit is sweet. And, maybe that quote has been translated into a thought that the bear can understand. That's quite a reach. But, we don't seem to have any other explanations at the moment.*

“Monique, come over here and look at this bear.”

“A bear?!” *Oh, my God!*

“It's ok; it's way below, honey. We could get in the camper long before it could get up here, Agent 32. Look at that! It's locked into some kind of pattern, mahal.”

As Monique looked down at the bear, it suddenly snapped out of its trance. It glanced up at us. But then, it peacefully walked away. *Wonder what was going through that poor animal's mind. A dollar for that bear's thoughts. Ok, make it ten. /I'm glad that bear is going away from us.*



“Let’s start packing up, 33. I’m ready to get out of here.”

“Do you already want to go back to Charlotte, asawa?”

“We don’t have to go all the way back to Charlotte, bana. How about we just head to Gastonia and check out something down there? Didn’t you say something about Lineberger Park yesterday?”

“Oh, yes. That’s right. The park with the miniature train. Want to ride it for three laps?”

“Sure. Why not?”

In less than a half-hour, we had reloaded the car with our stuff. I then turned off the gas, water and electricity, and emptied the three sewage tanks. We were soon rolling down the steep slope. *Feels – and definitely sounds – like we need new front brakes. Wonder how much that will cost. Too much, I’m sure. Cars – always consuming money.*

The black bear, now mightily preoccupied, passed in front of us as if on some covert mission.